

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this study has been to investigate the causes behind the occurrence of grammatical errors in the written English of Tamil students and determine whether the errors are attributable to interlingual or intralingual interference. The second aim of this study has been to determine the influence of the socio-economic and sociolinguistic status of the subjects on their competence of the English language.

Encouraged by previous studies that emphasized the difficulties that L2 learners find in the use of English grammar, the researcher focused her research on the grammatical errors made by Tamil students in their written English. The researcher who is an English teacher herself has long observed that many Tamil students, especially at lower secondary level, cannot produce error free sentences. This prompted the researcher to study these errors and their sources. This will enable teachers of English language to be

aware of the types of grammatical errors common among the Tamil students and be better equipped to rectify them.

5.1 Summary of Findings

In this section, the researcher presents the findings she gathered about the SES and SLS of the subjects through the use of a questionnaire. Next, the findings from the written task pertaining to the types of errors and their sources are also presented.

5.1.1 Findings from Questionnaire about Subjects' SES and SLS

Researches by Bowey (1995), Hecht & Greenfield (2001) state that children from lower SES and SLS background are more likely to have difficulty in reading and writing when compared to children from higher status, especially during elementary school years. Gaudart (2003) claims that even in urban areas, there seems to be difference in pupils' linguistic competence. Middle and upper middle-class children are more proficient in the second language and sometimes third language. Those from the lower socio-economic stratum could barely function academically in one language by the time they left school.

Based on these claims the researcher investigated the background of the subjects based on the socio-economic and sociolinguistic status. The analysis of the data gathered from the questionnaire showed a significant

correlation between the SES and SLS and lack of exposure to the English language has caused the Tamil students to be weak in English.

Below is the summary of the SES and SLS of the subjects:

- a. 50% of subjects come from low-income homes. Most of the parents work as laborers, mechanics, drivers or do small scale business. The take home wages per family is below RM 1500.
- b. 50% of the parents have had only secondary level education. About 5% of the fathers and 25% of the mothers have had no formal education. These statistics shows the poor home literacy rate. Poor home literacy limits the access to reading materials or modeling of reading by adults at home. This has been cited as a main casual variable leading to reduced writing performance in low SES children.
(Arob@se,www.arobase.to.)
- c. The extent of usage of English shows that subjects seldom speak in English with their parents except occasionally with their siblings. The English language is most often used in school during the English lesson and with their English teachers. This shows that the English language is not given preference at home, and this may be because the parents could have stressed on the importance of using the mother tongue at home. In schools, the subjects are more exposed to English

now that both Science and Mathematics are taught in English. English is used more often when communicating with classmates of different ethnic groups.

- d. Exposure to English in media such as television, radio and newspapers has been encouraging. Majority of subjects have stated that they like watching English programmes and movies.
- e. A majority of the subjects have also stated that writing in English is more difficult compared to other skills, like reading and speaking. The subjects have also stated that learning English grammar is difficult. This shows that the subjects have realized that writing, being a productive skill, demands a good repertoire of the language. If they lack competence in the language, errors are unavoidable and their message undelivered.

This study has shown that the SES and SLS factors are important in determining the proficiency level of the subjects in the English language. These two factors have revealed that home literacy, attitude and motivation affect second language acquisition.

5.1.2 Findings from Analysis of Errors

As stated earlier, this study attempts to describe the types of grammatical errors made by the Tamil students in their written English. The grammatical items selected for this study are verbs, prepositions, articles, pronouns and conjunctions. The rationale being these items are commonly used in basic writing tasks.

The researcher conducted a written task where the selected subjects were required to construct sentences using the contextual clues given. The errors found in the written task were analyzed and categorized into misselection, omission, addition and misordering errors. Within these categories, errors were further classified in terms of word class within the parameters of the study which include; verbs, prepositions, articles, pronouns and conjunctions.

Below is the summary of the grammatical errors according to its type.

Verbs

The verbs/ verb phrase errors made up 47% of the total number of grammatical errors. A total of 889 verb errors were identified in the written task. Of this, 532 or 60% was misselection of correct verbs, 32% was omission errors, 7% was due to addition and 1% was misordering of verbs.

The misselection type errors revealed that the subjects encountered difficulties in the selection of the correct verb tense to indicate the correct time reference. Subjects also were unable to select the correct verb form to concord the subject-verb agreement. Misselection of full verbs was evidence of poor vocabulary and this resulted in incorrect use of collocations. Selection of the correct auxiliary was also difficult for the subjects.

Under the omission category, subjects committed errors when they did not insert the *-ed* to the verbs to indicate the past tense for regular verbs. They also omitted the auxiliary verbs in their sentences. In the addition category, subjects redundantly inserted verbs in sentences. Misordering of verbs occurred when subjects followed the subject-object verb structure to construct sentences.

Articles

A total of 366 article errors were detected. Of this, 238 or 71% were omission errors, 18% errors was due to addition of articles where not necessary and 11% was misselection errors. Errors relating to the definite article '*the*' were more prominent compared to the indefinite article. One main reason why articles pose a problem to the subjects is the absence of articles in the Tamil language.

Pronouns

Errors pertaining to pronouns made up 295 or 16% of the total number of errors. Out of this, 50% were omission errors, 37% due to misselection, 8% misordering of pronouns and 5% addition of pronouns where not necessary. Confusion arose when the subjects could not differentiate the pronunciation of pronouns such as 'his' and 'he's', 'their' and 'they are'.

Prepositions

A total of 288 prepositional errors were detected. This is 15% of the total number of errors. Out of the total number of prepositional errors, 120 or 42% were omission errors. 95 or 33% were addition errors, 25 % was misselection errors. Most of the errors derived from omission of prepositions, followed by additions and misselections. The errors in the use of prepositions might have been caused by their frequent occurrence in English or because of the absence of the exact mother tongue equivalent to all the prepositions in English. The most frequently used preposition was '*by*', '*in*', '*on*' and '*near*'.

Conjunctions

The subjects made the least number of errors in the use of conjunctions. Out of 88 errors, 68% was due to omissions, 18% was misselection of conjunctions and 14% was addition of conjunctions.

5.2 Sources of errors

In the attempt to distinguish the sources of these errors, the researcher found that the errors made by the subjects were attributable to both L1 interference and also second language difficulties. Thus, some causes of errors were given multiple explanations.

While analyzing the sources of these grammatical errors, the researcher noticed traces of literal translation from Tamil to English. The researcher had to refer to the Tamil grammar and compared it with the English grammar, and this helped to detect the sources of errors derived from the intrusion of the Tamil language. The summary below relates the errors attributed by L1 interference.

(i) Interlingual errors

The inter-language of the subjects showed a lot of mother tongue influence. Learners hypothesized based on what they considered the English language system should have corresponded to their mother tongue elements. This shows that first-language patterns interact with L2 development. Below are errors derived from L1 interference:

- i. The use of simple present tense verb instead of the past tense verb to construct sentences with time reference '*Yesterday*', '*During the last school holidays*'. Even with the time marker given, the subjects were

unable to select the correct verb tense especially those pertaining to irregular verbs. The absence of irregular verbs in the Tamil language has attributed to these errors.

- ii. Incorrect selection or omission of auxiliary verbs resulted in erroneous sentences. Subjects faced difficulties and were confused over the use of '*has*' or '*have*', '*is*' or '*are*' and '*shall*' and '*will*'. This again is attributable to the absence of auxiliaries in the Tamil language.
- iii. Following the sentence pattern Subject-Object-Verb to construct sentences. This resulted in misordering type errors as the subjects followed the Tamil sentence pattern S-O-V instead of the English pattern S-V-O.
- iv. The selection of wrong pronouns because of confusion is observed, and, in some cases, the pronouns were used interchangeably.
- v. Misordering of pronouns was evident in sentence structures that followed the S-O-V pattern.
- vi. Selection of prepositions equivalent to Tamil in English structures. The subjects were not aware of the absence of the exact mother tongue equivalents to the prepositions in English. Moreover, English prepositions can be used in multiple contexts. This has also led to the subjects most often omitting the prepositions.

vii. The omission of articles, especially the definite articles, before the noun phrases that function as the objects. This again is because of the absence of articles in Tamil.

(ii) Intralingual errors

However, not all the grammatical errors were attributable to L1 interference. Most of the errors were identified as intra-lingual or developmental errors that derived from the target language difficulties. These errors illustrate the learner is attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbooks (Richards 1974b). Intra-lingual or developmental errors are explained in terms of (i) overgeneralization, (ii) ignorance of rule restrictions, (iii) incomplete application of rules and (iv) false concepts hypothesized. Such examples are as follows:

- i. The use of the simple present tense for the past tense is attributable to overgeneralization associated with redundancy reduction. The *-ed* marker is omitted as the subjects hypothesized that it carries no meaning since pastness is already indicated with the time reference.
- ii. Omission of the third person *-s* due to overgeneralization and this distorts the subject-verb concord.

- iii. Use of *-ed* marker to all verbs regardless of tenses and whether they are regular or irregular is due to overgeneralization of rules.
- iv. Substitutions of verbs such as '*made*' for '*cooked*' and '*see*' for '*visit*' because of false concepts hypotheses when the subjects face confusion as they feel that the members of such pairs are synonyms.
- v. The use of '*have*' with singular and '*has*' with plural indicates subjects' failure to observe rule restrictions.
- vi. Omission of auxiliaries in sentences is regarded as incomplete application of rules. The subjects main concern is to put the message across and they feel it can be done without the need to master the language rules.
- vii. Misordering of verbs with noun phrases and wrong sequencing of words also indicates incomplete application of rules.
- viii. Selection of wrong prepositions is attributable to ignorance of rule restrictions. The subjects have failed to realize that the choice of prepositions depend on the words before it, sometimes on the words after it and sometimes on both.

- ix. Selection and addition of wrong articles is due to ignorance of rule restrictions and this is because the subjects have failed to understand the rules for the use of articles with countable and uncountable nouns.
- x. Use of pronouns where not needed is evidence of ignorance of rule restrictions because the subjects have failed to understand that we do not normally use a personal pronoun if the verb already has a subject.

Other than the sources mentioned above, errors were also traced to certain learning strategies employed by the subjects. Below are such examples.

- i. Analysis of the data revealed that the subjects made excessive use of the present tense form of a verb, by dropping the regular past tense *-ed* morpheme in situations where the context demands past tense. This is a simplification strategy employed by students to cut down the complexity of task involved in sentence production (Richards 1974b:175).
- ii The errors derived from the use of definite article *the* and indefinite articles *a / an* can also be independent of L1 transfer as suggested by Richards (1974:186). As the errors were apparently unsystematic, some subjects showed a good command while others consciously or unconsciously either omitted the articles or selected the wrong one. This appears that the subjects used strategy of avoidance (Brown, 1980:207).

- iii. Selection of wrong verbs where subjects selected the verbs incorrectly because both words sound the same.
- iv. The analysis of data showed that most of the subjects had less difficulties in constructing a first clause or sentence in the correct past tense form; however, when they tried to use a conjunction, it resulted in an error because they unconsciously ignored the past or used his/her verbal communication strategy that forced the use of a present form instead.
- v. Teacher induced errors. Where the errors are the result of pedagogical procedures utilised by the teacher especially by hypercorrection, where the teacher constantly corrects the learner who attempts to produce the correct structures and thereby overgeneralises the rule and produces a deviant structure (Corder 1974).

In general there were more errors induced by target language difficulties than mother tongue interference. This confirms the claim made by George (1971) who found that one- third of the deviant sentences from second language learners could be attributable to language transfer that is interference from mother tongue. A similar figure was given by Lane (1962), Brudhiprabha(1968) and Richards (1974a:5).

Interlingual errors occur when the subjects look at the English system through their mother tongue. When one does not know some rules of the

second language then one either keeps silent or uses the most similar available rule, i.e. of one's mother tongue (Corder, 1974:130). Thus, the subjects have opted to literal translation from Tamil to English by making hypothesis that seem to be based on what they consider the system should have corresponded to their mother tongue elements. When they cannot find the corresponding or parallel elements, they tend to generalize. Unless they have a chance to test these hypotheses, their system is likely to be fossilized.

The intralingual errors derived from the learning process of the second language itself reflect the generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. Subjects lack knowledge of forms and functions and, also, rules of exceptions in English. For example, they do not understand that a preposition in English always qualifies a noun that follows it. Unknowingly, they use it to qualify a noun that precedes it.

The researcher is of the opinion that unless the subjects are given a chance to test their hypotheses, their system is likely to get fossilized. If they are given challenging tasks and if they are asked to express their feelings, ideas and attitudes in English, without worrying about errors, they will have more opportunities to test their hypotheses and, as a result, develop good language competence.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS

This study has clearly shown that the fundamental factor that has attributed to the numerous errors made by the Tamil students in their English writing is incomplete learning of English grammar rules and literal translation from Tamil. Knowledge of grammar rules is necessary to enable students to put words in the correct order to communicate their ideas and intentions. As aptly put by Gaudart (2003), "I believe grammar is an essential part of good writing and speaking. It is not essential to learn the rules of grammar but a learner needs to know how they are applied."

The communicative approach used in Malaysian schools in the teaching of English is aimed at producing students to use the language to communicate efficiently. Thus, teachers assume that by providing sufficient input and opportunities to use English in purposeful communication, students will eventually acquire the knowledge of grammar. Grammar is not seen as a central organizing principle of communication, but rather as an important component of communication (Richards, 1995).

But the problem that is evident among our students, as observed by the researcher, is most of the L2 learners are able to use English extensively for social purposes but display remarkably little progress in grammatical accuracy. The researcher has also observed that students show acquisition of only certain grammatical features of the target language even after many

years of learning the language. The researcher's claim is complimented by the observation made by Richards (1995):

“These learners despite prolonged contact with and use of English, fail to go beyond an initial level of proficiency in many areas of grammar, despite developing greater control in other areas of communicative competence.”

Bearing the current performance of our students in the English language supported by the findings of this study, the researcher believes there are several implications attained for the reference and appraisal of both English language teachers and students in secondary schools as follows :

1. An important matter identified in the writings of the students is the role of language transfer as students had resorted to literal translation and many first language patterns were evident. So it is very clear that L1 has interacted with L2 developmental processes. English language teachers should be aware that the differences between L1 and L2 might affect second language learning. The consequences of this difference are cited by Richards (1995). First, they may influence the rate at which second language features are acquired (Keller-Cohen, 1979). They may lead to avoidance of certain L2 structures (Schachter, 1974). They may lead to over-production of certain L2 forms, which are sometimes perceived as carrying L1 discourse functions (Schachter and Rutherford, 1979).

Finally language transfer may constrain the acquisition process of L2. Students should be made aware of this.

2. Learners should be provided with natural exposure to the English language. Otherwise, they would not have the opportunities to test their hypotheses, and their errors, initially caused by L1 interference, may get fossilized. By testing their hypotheses, they tend to get away from their mother tongue and get closer to the target language. Teachers should understand that fossilized errors are very difficult to be eradicated once they become part of the learner's system. As M.P Jain (1969) points out, even if these errors are got over with, they may appear again in moments of stress. Instead of preparing remedial measures for fossilized errors, it is important to give learners challenging tasks where their motivation to learn the language is rekindled.
3. The confusion pertaining to inflections of verbs to indicate person, number and tenses and which article and preposition to use can be reduced through drills and practices in context. Teachers can also explain briefly the grammatical rules and facts governing the above structures to make learners understand.
4. Students do not seem to use certain structures like the Present Perfect, Past Continuous, etc. in their writing. The most frequently used

structures are the Simple Present and Simple Past tenses. Although, students have been exposed to other tenses, they feel that as long as they get along with simple structures, they do not need to make an attempt to use anything beyond that. Teachers should be aware of this and provide tasks that require more difficult structures.

5. This study also investigated the SES and SLS of the subjects. The data analyzed revealed that most of the subjects come from low SES and SLS. Students from low SES background are at a disadvantage when it comes to acquiring knowledge of the world outside their home and neighbourhood. They do not get access to books, magazines, social network and other learning resources and this hinders their reading and writing ability in English. Moreover, they do not get parental guidance and support. They emphasise rote learning rather than independent self-directed learning (Borich, 2000). When we have students from low SES background, teachers especially language teachers, must provide a warm and encouraging classroom environment by letting students know that help is available. Teachers need to teach what students need to know and what they can grasp. Frequent opportunities should be provided for them to practise the language patterns learnt. Frequently correcting the wrong answers in the absence of support or encouragement could be construed as a personal criticism by some low SES students (Borich, 2000:27).

5.4 PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

The process of language development varies from learner to learner. All of them do not learn at the same pace. As language teachers we should be aware of the individual learners' system. Below are several pedagogical suggestions that can be taken into consideration to reduce the number of errors committed by our ESL students in their written English.

- i. Teachers must frequently remind their students that when they speak or write in English, they should think in the target language and not in their mother tongue so that they do not bring in any features of their mother tongue. Teachers should explain why certain mother tongue features are ungrammatical when used in the English context. It would be ideal if the teacher has some basic knowledge of the students' mother tongue.
- ii. Teachers should advise their students to show perseverance in studying English. English is a complex language with irregular spelling. The pronunciation is puzzling and it often differs from the written form of a word. The vocabulary is elaborate. The complexity of vocabulary and grammar could strain the learning capacity. So students should be made aware that there are no short cuts to learning the language. Teachers should give sufficient exposure to the language through various language skills of reading and listening. In this way, the possibility of making errors can be minimized.

- iii. Teachers must create opportunities for natural exposure and genuine interaction during language learning. Students should be advised to listen to good English from whatever available sources like radio, television and good local speakers of the language. They can listen to taped conversation where English is used for everyday purposes. Teachers should also set up a class library or self access centre which would provide English language learning materials.
- iv. Teachers must inform students of exceptions to the rule as regards grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. For example, when teaching verbs, we should pay special attention to irregular verbs because this is an area where students are likely to make errors. Students should be told that the words '*hour*' and '*heir*' are pronounced without the '*h*' sound. When teaching the suffix *-less*, students should be made aware that although it has the meaning 'not', this cannot be literally extended to all words with *-less*.
- v. The majority of teachers of English are non-native speakers. There is a likelihood for us to make mistakes or go wrong in some aspects of the language. So it is important to upgrade ourselves professionally as good models of the language we teach. Teachers too need to be well exposed to the language. We must keep abreast of current issues in language through reading books and journals related to our profession. We should

attend in-service courses and workshops to gain knowledge of the latest trends and approaches in language teaching.

- vi. Teachers should respect students' errors as they are part of the learning process. Respecting does not mean taking no notice of them. It means that we should not treat these errors as evidence of stupidity, idleness or evil intent of the students. Written scripts should not be returned with simply everything underlined in red ink. Teachers should give a clarification for the errors. They should understand that those errors can be corrected by the students.

The following are some suggestions on error correction techniques.

- i. Proof reading skills should be taught to students. Proof reading would involve making corrections and improvements to words, grammar, spelling, punctuation in the writing.
- ii. Peer review should also be introduced. Students should be encouraged to review the written work of their peers and give feedback for further improvement. This will also boost students' confidence.
- iii. During listening activity, teachers can follow three basic options to correct students. First, give verbal correction as soon as we hear an error. Otherwise, take note of errors and raise these once students have

completed their utterance or activity and allow fellow students to correct each other.

- iv. Students should be made familiar with correction symbols. 'T' for tense, 'sp' for spelling, 'SV' for concord, '^' for missing word are some examples. Teachers should be always consistent in using these symbols.

5.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following are some suggestions for further research in this field.

1. Further study with regards to grammar accuracy needs to be conducted with a much larger sample in order to verify the present study. Ensure that the study is carried out on low, intermediate and advance level students to make a comparison of their language level.
2. In addition to the written task, an oral task also needs to be conducted in order to compare and contrast the samples performance in both skills.
3. Apart from the sentence construction exercise, other written task such as cloze type, translation exercise and a grammar test could be included.

4. With regards to task administration , it would perhaps be preferable to have the task conducted under strict conditions but without limitation of time. This will enable all the samples to complete the task.
5. 'In addition to a questionnaire to illicit information on the subjects background it could be preferable to have an interview session with the subjects' parents. The data collected would be justifiable.

5.6 CONCLUSION

The researcher is satisfied that she has been able to carry out the study successfully. She hopes the findings of this study will be of use to all English Language teachers of Tamil speakers. She proposes that further studies be carried out for a more in-depth investigation on learners' errors.